

# A HUGE RESPONSIBILITY

by Leslie Davison

It was my honor and pleasure to give the keynote at the Annual NELL Breakfast last month in lovely San Antonio.

As elementary teachers, we have the great privilege of sharing a new language and culture. After 20 years of teaching Spanish, I'm still excited for my students to taste a Spanish tortilla for the first time or to master the practice of pointing with their lips like a local in Honduras. In most cases, we give our students their first exposure to our beloved language and culture. Best job ever, right? Of course it is. But it comes with a great responsibility. If 10-year-olds become discouraged while learning a second language, or worse, carry a negative outlook towards other languages and cultures, we could be to blame. Learning a language takes a lifetime. Our little ones need to advance with a "Can Do" attitude, in terms of language proficiency and global awareness.

**Leslie Davison** is a National Board Certified World Language teacher with more than 15 years of experience at both the elementary and high school levels. She was instrumental in starting a successful K-5 dual immersion program. Passionate about culture and global education, Leslie has taught in both Singapore and Honduras. Leslie shares her love for language acquisition by presenting at national and international conferences as well as offering workshops on CI/TPRS methods and technology integration. Leslie was recently awarded Colorado's World Language Teacher of the Year. When not teaching and learning, Leslie can be found running or skiing in the mountains with her dog or kitesurfing around the world. Currently, Leslie is teaching Spanish and serves as a Dual Immersion K-12 Coordinator and Instructional Technology Coach in Colorado.



Aware of this, I strive for a holistic approach to teaching and learning that is authentic and relevant to my young language learners. This starts with word choice and moves quickly to storytelling. Before long, students start owning the language.

## WORD CHOICE

I focus on age-appropriate language that my students actually use in English. Contact time is limited. So I aim for what is relevant to my students today and not six years from now. In the past, my curriculum focused on lists of nouns or topics not relevant to elementary students. The word Tuesday or the color of someone's shirt is simply not relevant for communication. I even caused tears a few years ago when asking (more like demanding for the sake of an assessment) the color of a student's dad's eyes. The boy eventually replied in English, "I'm sorry, I just don't know. My dad works a lot and I guess I never paid attention to his eye color." These students are just starting out in the language. We want them to acquire the top 100-200 words they first need to communicate.

Not sure what language structures to teach? Listen carefully to a class of second graders for 10 minutes and you'll quickly tune in to the words they use to communicate:

- "Look, ..."
- "Can we ...?"
- "I saw ..."
- "No way!"
- "Awesome!"
- and more

Both the words "teeth" and "blood" are a requirement for every first grader as this language pops-up on a weekly basis. I also focus more on verbs. This allows students to function in the target language more quickly. If I'm in doubt, I reference Mark Davies' *A Frequency Dictionary of Spanish* to check the relative frequency of a word. Lastly, using high frequency language structures allows

## Three keys to teaching elementary students

me to revisit the "specific" language all year long. This proves to have a longer impact on language acquisition than short-term memorization.

### STORIES

Storytelling is a powerful vehicle for making content stick. Much of our content, culture and language is delivered through stories. A story is simply putting language in context, rather than teaching the word in isolation. The more personal, engaging and relevant the story the sooner my students acquire the target language.

My students are thrilled to act out short scenarios or mini stories that are personal to them. Children want to act out the story again, again and again. While retelling a story students add personal and cultural details to the story. This allows me to repeat the target structures regularly enough for my students to eventually produce the language on their own.

### A FOURTH GRADE STORY

Our most current story in fourth grade is about a boy, Stone, who wants his friend Cody to make a Spanish tortilla. (See Photo 1.) Cody travels to Madrid to buy the special ingredients. He then takes the Metro to la Plaza Mayor and then walks to El Corte Inglés. Cody buys the ingredients for a Spanish Tortilla (with euros) and accidentally steals a tiny diamond in the process. Cody is taken to the local jail and Stone never eats the tortilla.

Through this cultural story students acquired the language:

- Wants someone to make a Spanish tortilla
- Travels
- Takes the Metro
- Buys ingredients
- Takes him to jail

Are you interested in reading about how and why storytelling is so successful? I recommend the book *Story Proof* by Kendall Haven.



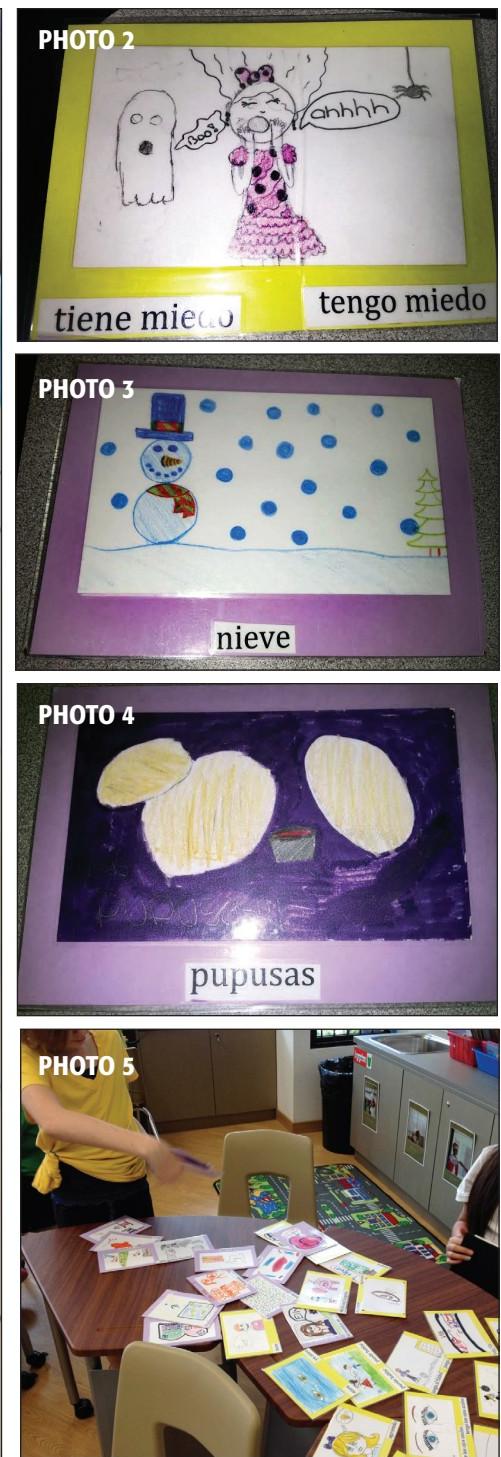
### LET THEM CREATE

Creating is key I encourage my students to create with the language early on. The sooner they produce something meaningful in a second language, the sooner they see value and success in learning the target language. I believe Novice-Level students can create. The key is limiting the vocabulary, focusing on high frequency words and giving students choice and freedom.

For example, after my first graders have 10-20 words under their belt, I put them in groups of two. I give each group six yel-

low cards. They contain verbs and images to represent the language: eats, goes, wants, says, takes, buys, etc. I also provide six purple cards. These contain a variety of words or expressions with images: pupusas, an airplane, Don Quijote, grandma, awesome, how are you?, etc. Each pair has to use four words from each color to create their own story or play. I also give each group a pile of props (a plastic eye, a truck, an authentic menu, a poster of Messi, etc.) that they can use as well. (See Photos 2-5.)

This activity is fun. It's creative and it



allows me time to move around and provide instant feedback while students are working. The final product is a fantastic assessment of the students' ability to communicate in an authentic context. It is also an effective advocacy piece for parents and administration.

Thanks, NNELL, for allowing me the opportunity to connect with some fabulous language teachers. Hope to see you all again soon. Until then, follow me @lesliedawson and share your elementary ideas at #earlylang or #langchat.